

Testimony of Debbie Pelley  
Hearing before the Senate Commerce Committee  
"Labels and Lyrics: Do Parental Advisory Stickers Inform Consumers and Parents?"  
June 16, 1998

My name is Debbie Pelley. I am a teacher at Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Arkansas and was present when four students and one teacher were killed and ten others injured by two 11 and 13 year old boys as the students evacuated the school building when a false fire alarm sounded on March 24, 1998.

I was the English teacher for the 13 year old, Mitchell Johnson, and had him in class an hour a day from August 15 to March 24. Mitchell was always respectful, using yes'mam and no'mam in his responses to me. In my class I never saw him exhibit anger, never saw him commit any hostile act toward any other student or exhibit any behavior that would make me think Mitchell could commit this act. In fact, he had a pleasant and even cheerful disposition and appeared to enjoy his many friends, and to enjoy life in general.

In a discussion with 7th grade classes the first day they were back at school after this tragedy, a discussion led by myself and another licensed professional counselor, James N. Woods, students explored possible reasons Mitchell could have committed this act. The students said that Mitchell had been listening to gangster rap music, and in particular to Tupac Shakur. They also said he had started to change a lot in the last two or three months.

On succeeding days numerous students on many occasions contributed the following information. Tupac Shakur and another rap group, Bone Thugs & Harmony, were Mitchell's favorite musical groups. (At this point I had never heard of either of these groups.) Mitchell brought this music to school with him; listened to it on the bus; tried listening to it in classes, sang the lyrics over and over at school, and played a cassette in the bathroom "about coming to school and killing all the kids". Students said that in the last couple of months Mitchell was always making the gang sign that is on the cover of Tupac's album, All Eyes On Me, and that Mitchell was far more into this music than anyone else they knew. Mitchell's mother, and Mitchell himself, recently confirmed that he bought these albums this last Christmas, three months before the tragedy.

One boy brought a CD by Tupac that Mitchell had lent to him and told me I could keep it, saying he didn't want to have anything more to do with the music because he felt it may have been an influence in Mitchell's life that led to this tragedy.

These 12 year old students showed me how to pull these lyrics by Tupac and Bone Thugs off the internet (about 500 pages of violent lyrics) and then identified Mitchell's favorite albums and songs that he was always singing. Following are a few examples of titles and quotes from those songs the way they are recorded on the internet. I wish every adult would take the time to read these lyrics as I have done. Most adults would be in for quite a shock.

**"Crept and We Came"** by Bone Thugs from the album, Lyrics on ... E 1999

**Cockin the 9 and ready to aim/ Pullin the Trigger/To blow out your brains/Bone got a gang/Man we crept and we came.** (This song has about 40 murder images like "putten them in the ground and pumpin the gun." Mitchell's mother recently confirmed that Mitchell is still very familiar with the lyrics to this song. Last words of this song are quite revealing considering the way Mitchell and Drew killed the five and injured the ten so stealthily.)"

**"Body Rott"** by Bone Thugs from the album, Art of War :: World War I album.

One refrain used over and over in this song is **"Nigga the war shouldn't stop until these mother fucking cops' body rott, body rott."** This song contains the "f" word 23 times and several references too bitches and hoes (their usual expressions for females).

**"Life Goes On"** from the All Eyez On Me album by TuPac.

**My homie from high school/he's getting bye/It's time to bury another brotha/ nobody cry.**

**"I Ain't Mad At Ya"** by TuPac from the All Eyez On Me album:

**I can see us after school/ we'd bomb on the first motherfucker/With the wrong shit on..**

**"2 Of Amerikaz Most Wanted"** by TuPac from the album All Eyes On Me.

Some fitting words since they killed and injured all females but one are these two lines: **"Picture perfect, I paint a perfect picture/Bomb the hoochies with precision."** Then the refrain **"Ain't nuttin but a gansta party"** is repeated five times in the chorus, and the chorus is repeated several times in the song.

**"Shorty Wanna Be A Thug"** by TuPac from the "All Eyez On Me album."

**He was a nice middle class nigga/But nobody knew the evil he'd do When he got a little bigger/...Was only sixteen, yet convicted as a felon/With a bunch of old niggas.** Chorus: **Say he wanna be/Shorties gonna be a Thug/Said he wanna be/One day he's gonna be/Said he's wanna be/Shorties gonna be's a thug.** (Last part is repeated several times in each chorus.)

**"Bury Me A G"** by TuPac from the Thug Life Vol. I album

**I got nothen' to lose sos I choose to be a killer/Went from bangin' to slangin'//Now I'm a dope dealer/All my life payed tha price to be the boss/Back in school/Wrote tha rules on gettin' tossed/popping rocks on the block was a past time/Pack a 9 all the time**

**"Blaze It" by Bone Thugs from the album The Art of War: World War II.**

**I'm so high. If reefer really makes you happy, nigga blaze it. hell yeah, hell yeah. Stay smokin', chokin', rollin' blunts [blunts are big marijauna joints] and we love it. We smoke and choke, we smoke and choke, and we love it. (This is repeated several times.) Now, I've been fucked up since the last weed song, and P.O.D.'d the whole night long.**

Several students verified that the theme and message of this music is that killing and being on death row are cool. The students themselves pointed out that the recording company that publishes TuPac is called Death Row Records and showed me that on the "All Eyes On Me Album" the cover advertises "Upcoming Death Row Releases" and one of them is called "Death Row Compilation" One of the songs by Bone Thugs & Harmony, "If I could Teach the World" from the album The Art Of War : : World War I says, "If I could teach the world, Then I would teach the world, whole wide world to be a thugsta just like me, like." That seems to be the point of their music.

On June 1st Mitchell Johnson's mother said that Mitchell himself said that the music may have influenced him and that the music sort of draws you in. She confirmed to me that Mitch did possess, and she still has, Mitchell's albums and cassettes by TuPac and by Bone Thugs. She knew he bought them this last Christmas before the shooting in March with money he had received as a Christmas present from relatives. Mitchell told her he bought them himself and had no trouble purchasing them. As noted above, numerous students reported the first day back at school that Mitch had started to change a lot the last two or three months and was making gang signs in the hall and around school.

Mitch's mother said he had always loved music and had sung specials at church and school since he was very little and that he owned and sang western music and gospel music as well. She did not know Mitchell had any that had warning labels on it. (These warning labels are in very small print and barely legible.) When she questioned Mitchell recently, he said he was first exposed to rap music through a girl in the neighborhood in Minnesota who had TuPac's music. He said he liked it because it was different. That was two years ago, when Mitchell and the girl were both 11 years old.

Surveys in three middle schools in Arkansas and one in Missouri indicate that a large percentage of students in middle schools now listen to gangster rap music, ranging from 39% to 84% of students that listen to TuPac and from 37% to 84% that listen to Bone Thugs and Harmony. Surveys were conducted in three middle schools in Arkansas and one in Missouri. Following are the results:

### Schools in Arkansas

- 1st School, 7th Graders - 39% like to listen to TuPac and 67% to Bone Thugs.
- 2nd School, 8th Graders - 68% like to listen to TuPac and 84% to Bone Thugs.
- 3rd School, 9th Graders - 82% like to listen to TuPac and 37% to Bone Thugs

In a rural middle school in Missouri the survey was conducted in the 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. The results are as follows:

- 5th grade - 65% to TuPac and 77% to Bone Thugs
  - 6th grade - 65% to TuPac and 75% to Bone Thugs
  - 7th & 8th Grades Combined - 58% to TuPac and 78% to Bone Thugs
- (The teacher did not keep 7th & 8th Grade Results Separate on These)

Numerous students made comments on these surveys that they liked and listened to this music, but that their parents would not have a clue as to who these groups were. The warning labels are extremely small on these albums. I had to actually look for it to find it when the students told me this music had warning labels on it. All parents and teachers with whom I have talked are shocked as I was when they see the lyrics and when they learn how many students are listening to this music. One parent wept when she saw the lyrics to which her son was being exposed.

I believe the message coming out of the tragedy in our school in Jonesboro, Arkansas is that even the good schools and responsible families can no longer protect their children from our society. Violent music is only one aspect of our culture but a very significant one that seems to have gotten very little attention in the recent school tragedies. And Bone Thugs and TuPac are only two of the many musical groups that are affecting our youth. According to the Pittsburgh Post Gazette, May 22, 1998 Andrew Wurst, the 14 year old boy who shot a teacher and injured two others in Edinboro, Pennsylvania, "called himself Satan and liked the rock group Marilyn Manson." (Marilyn Manson is a shock rocker known for his violent lyrics.)

I believe that legislators who are elected to represent and protect the citizens in our country should find a way to investigate the scope of this problem, to protect our children from this music, and to educate the parents and society even as I have been educated in the last several weeks.

**For the lyrics to these songs above and about 55 more songs by Bone Thugs & Harmony with the same type of violence, gangs, profanity, sex, & drugs, go to <http://henge.com/~msmith/Lyrics/e1999/lyrics.html>**

**For more than one hundred songs by TuPac (many of the songs are three and four pages long) with this same type of violence, gangs, drugs, and sex, go to <http://www.trailerpark.com/tequila/jjtupac/lyrics.htm>**